Charles University in Prague

Faculty of Education

Department of English Language and Literature

Dystopia as a Theme and Narrative Device in the Late 1980s British Fiction

Dystopie jako téma a narativní strategie v britské literatuře konce 80. let 20. století

Author: Jiří Kopuletý

Supervisor: PhDr. Petr Chalupský PhD.

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Abstract

The purpose of this work is to describe the way, in which the theme of dystopia is covered in British literature of the 1980s. Two works will be used for demonstration: *London Fields* (1989) by Martin Amis and *The Child in Time* (1987) by Ian McEwan. Apart from the description of the dystopian elements alone, the subject of this thesis will also be the analysis of their use as a narrative device. Principal constituents of this thesis are the theoretical part, where the context is given in which the two works need be approached and the practical part, where the actual analysis is performed.

Abstrakt

Smyslem práce je postihnout způsob, jakým je zpracována tématika dystopie v britské literatuře 80. let 20. století. K ilustraci poslouží dvě díla: *Londýnská pole*, (1989), jejichž autorem je Martin Amis a *Dítě v pravý čas* (1987), jehož autorem je Ian McEwan. Kromě samotného popisu prvků dystopie bude předmětem práce také rozbor jejich užití jako narativní strategie. Hlavními částmi práce jsou teoretická část, kde jsou popsány souvislosti, do nichž je třeba tato dvě díla vsadit a praktická část, kde je přistoupeno k samotnému rozboru.

Declaration

I hereby state that I have elaborated this bachelor thesis individually under the supervision of PhDr. Petr Chalupský PhD. And that I have quoted all the sources of information used.

Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracoval samostatně pod vedením PhDr. Petra Chalupského PhD., a že jsem citoval všechny použité informační zdroje.

Prague, 17th of April, 2009

Podpis

Table of contents

“The audiences, however, brought him to bouts of delirious misanthropy. (…) Was it any surprise the world was led by morons with these enfeebled souls at the ballot box, these ordinary ‘folk’ — a word much used by the hosts — these infants who longed for nothing more than to be told when to laugh? Stephen tilted his bottle and sucked and was ready to disenfranchise them at all.”

Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time*

“Maybe it’s like the weather. Maybe you can’t keep it out.”

Martin Amis, *London Fields*

I. Introduction

When we have a look at our recent history, it is not a problem to say that our parents have lived in conditions close to those described in *Animal Farm*. Now, when the outbreak of the 21st century is at its height and new technologies of gathering and processing information emerge that no one would think of some thirty years ago, there are people who fear that our descendants shall live in a world not dissimilar to the world of *1984*.

As it seems, some dystopian elements could be found anywhere, anytime. Every period has its fears and impulses that provoke literary reactions, sometimes these responses are so crucial that without them it is utterly impossible to fully understand the *zeitgeist* and the way of contemporary thinking. There is, of course, a rich spectrum of literature from various parts of history and the choice is always abundant. But then there are times that are already well-covered, where the distance needed to capture the essentials or adversely the subtle nuances has been available long time ago. On the other hand, for periods that are too recent, the distance is still not at our disposal. This historical understanding and contextual matching is not for us to acquire anyway, it is for those who will come after us — we have to live it for someone else is able to evaluate it.

With the years counting, the time is slowly coming to prepare for a more complex understanding of the times that are not so far ago for the contemporaries to be gone, but those who are to experience this understanding have not lived it themselves. These people have no personal memories that would interfere with the clear perception and undisturbed approach towards it. The time slowly comes for us to start to analyze the 1980s.

Apart from the fact that the current students of universities have not lived this decade themselves, there are also some other aspects that make it of interest. On the level of politics and the power in more generic meaning, present-day

representatives are in an increasing percentage recruited from people who had formed their relation to power right in the period of the 1980s. On the cultural level, these years are still able to keep their influence through movements that manifest their affiliation with the aesthetics of the decade in music, fashion, cinematography and other fields of cultural activities. It is so influential now because the cultural footprint of its greatest protagonists was so strong and distinctive at the times it came — something that people in the future will probably not be able to tell about the recent years.

Not only was the period successful in the mentioned forms of art and entertainment, but also in literature, which is particularly remarkable in Great Britain, where such writers as Julian Barnes, Kazuo Ishiguro, Timothy Mo, Salman Rushdie — and of course Martin Amis and Ian McEwan — published their significant works. But even in such blooming times there had been a great deal of anxiety, as the contemporary world situation was anything but light-hearted. The writers not only evaluated their recent past as we do now, but also wrote about their present. And this could not have come without a reflection of the less cheering aspects of it.

The quotations at the beginning of this thesis were not chosen randomly. Although they both do not come from the same person, they are closely related, which may not be apparent at first sight. The first one comes from Ian McEwan. This British author describes feelings of Stephen, the main character of the novel *The Child in Time*. Its principal event is the loss of the only child, the loss that leads to deep reflection on the world and the nature of the time. The plot of the book is in short the story of coping with this loss and accepting the life as it comes. The child, of course, has two parents and each of the two has adopted a slightly different approach to life after this change, which adds up a level of intimacy to the novel. This intimacy, however, for the sake of the novel, does not take place in vacuum. After Stephen is forced to re-evaluate his

position in the world, he is able to see it in a different light. He sees things that he does not like and that he would otherwise miss. This view is no doubt deeply affected by the mental state of the main character, but once uttered, the doubt is always in the circulation and it does not cease to raise the old question whether or not optimism is a mere lack of relevant information.

The second quotation is a thought that occurs in the mind of Samson Young, the not wholly reliable narrator of the story of *London Fields*, the main plot of which is the murder of Nicola Six, a woman who foresees her murder and slowly drifts towards her death without any attempt to avoid it. But here the story takes place in a world that is full of action and that has some relation to the epic. The interaction between the actual story and the environment in the middle of which it happens is less restricted to the level of perception. The book is literally laden with comments and thoughts on the (fictional) world situation and the current state of the society, which returns — having first taken the form of parallels, metaphors and indirect implications — with greater strength to increase in its turn the overall intensity of the work.

With regard to the above said, I believe there is what to process and there are good reasons why to do that, particularly because it really is like the weather. Why would we speak about social or political climate then? The writer simply cannot afford to keep it out. And in these two works, Amis and McEwan certainly did not.

II. Theoretical background

2.1 Contextual framework

The novels in question are very complex. They not only contain absorbing plot, serious moral questions and refined characteristics of the protagonists, they are also a personal takedown of the time and place in which the author wrote them.

First let us have a look at the period. As stated in the introductory part, the 1980s were culturally a strongly defined decade, with its own lifestyle and particular processes in the political and social spheres, most remarkable of which was undoubtedly the ongoing cold war. This continuous struggle between the main world powers has eventuated in the unprecedented danger of total nuclear extinction, which had enormous impact on literature and consequently is strongly present in the two novels. What is important is that these works were written closely before the cold war's end that had come very abruptly from the point of view of the contemporaries. Now we know that there was not enough will to rule such an extremely ineffective system, but the contemporary writers of the 1980s would expect that the abruptness would present itself the opposite way, and this expectation permeates the novels in question.

Yet still, the question of effectiveness turned out to be crucial for the ending of the cold war. In the USA, this was closely tied to the so-called *Reaganomics* — economic policies promoted by President Reagan. Great Britain, however, had its own political analogy at the moment — the *Thatcherism*, political programme centred on classical liberalism and free-market capitalism. Margaret Thatcher, who was elected British Prime Minister in 1979, "which signalled the definite end of the post-war consensus." (Head, 30) She was a conservative politician not afraid of taking an ideological stance or even using religion to support her programme. Ian McEwan makes a strong allusion to her in *The Child In Time*. Although McEwan never reveals the sex of the prime minister,

in the translation into Czech language, which morphologically does not permit such an ambiguity, the gender of the prime minister is female, which only strengthens the allusion to Margaret Thatcher.

Nevertheless, McEwan does not only blame the government. As the very initial quotation shows, he is well aware of the fact that it is the people, who have elected the government and with help these *common people*, the government is able to keep its power.

2.2 Brief account of the development of dystopia in British literature

Dystopia is a term derived from the word *utopia* with the help of Greek prefix dys-, meaning *bad*. A classical dystopia, as found in the books by Aldous Huxley, George Orwell or Yevgeny Zamyatin, depicts an undesirable society inclining towards totalitarianism, which tries to keep the population as homogenous as possible, forcing an absolute conformity of its members. This regime usually covers the whole planet, or there are more such regimes that share the world. As a result, there is nowhere to escape to for the main hero, who usually decides to run away from it, even if he or she would not be captured by the forces of order, which enjoy privileged positions in these societies.

Classic dystopian genre always departed from the fear of abuse of new technologies and approaches, be it the futurist foundations of *Brave New World* or political observations of George Orwell that led him to write his *1984*. The 20th century saw a boom of science fiction that had enough energy to absorb the sum of all the possible and impossible facts and theories from scientific research, one of the fields of which, not an under-endowed one, is the research of devices to control. As a matter of fact, any contemporary literary work dealing with the latest technologies is usually taken as science fiction, which applies for the cinematography as well. That is why it is possible to say that the literary genre of dystopia has been consumed by the science fiction.

As dead as it may be as a genre, dystopia as a theme has survived not only in science fiction, but also in the novel as such. With this is, however, connected the shift in the perception of the regime. In the later works, the narration usually does not focus on the system, but its individual subjects that together create it. This is clear from the meditations of Ian McEwan's main character in *The Child in Time*, as quoted at the beginning of this thesis. In *London Fields*, the situation is similar to this but a bit more complex, as it is primarily a novel that concentrates on the mutual interaction of the subjects and their *force fields*.

In addition to that, the dystopian theme has experienced another shift in the usage. It was the continuous retreat to background that also caused the theme's more subtle usage and that is connected with the technique of incluing. While in Huxley's or Orwell's dystopian works, the dystopia itself was the theme on which the whole book centred, later authors found it useful as a framework for other fictitious plots. Let us have a look for example at the society in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, for example. The view of its society can be called dystopian without being inconsistent with the previous usage, but it is not the topic. The first aspect that a reader of *A Clockwork Orange* perceives is undoubtedly the stunning brutality with which Alex and his *droogs* perpetrate violence on the others. The less visible, but the more important are the moral dilemmas and the change that the main hero undergoes. Seemingly only after that follows the question of where is the plot taking place. And because it is this underlying dimension what heavily influences the other actions in the story, it should be treated as equal in terms of importance for the actual ways of understanding it.

A further shift towards a more delicate use of this theme came in the 1980s with the two novels that are subject of this thesis. An argumentation can be possibly

held that the societies described in the books are not fully dystopian, but the dystopia as such is a warning against a possible advent of a totalitarian regime if people are not attentive and sensitive enough in the future. These novels seem rather not to warn, but to ask a question whether or not the conditions of the world, as there was in the time of their publication was close enough to a dystopia.

2.3 Postmodern employment of dystopia

Alongside with the development of science fiction, the altered use of the theme of dystopia, and shift from the warning to the question, another aspects have emerged. These were the postmodernist tendencies of the British literature, of which the both books are indivisible part. The main features of the British literature in 1980s and 1990s are described by David Malcolm as "fascination with (…) historical events and processes in (…) (sometimes very immediate) past; an interest in settings abroad (…); a considerable prominence of genre mixture; and metafictional interests." (Malcolm, 6)

These aspects are accompanied with the postmodernist relativism and fragmentation that penetrates the current society as a whole. (Giddens, 495) Ian McEwan directly expresses the relativist stance of *The Child in Time* through the ending of a rather long discourse of Thelma, a theoretical physicist: "(…) you think that some local, passing fashion like modernism — modernism! — is the intellectual achievement of our time. Pathetic!" (McEwan, 45) Indirectly then, the relativism reminds of itself through various motifs of relativity of perception, by which the book is permeated. (Malcolm, 10) Relativism is presented in *London Fields* by the mutual affectation of the individual characters, the influence of the society on the environment and vice versa. After all, the "London fields" are pointed out in a particular moment as "only fields of operation and observation, only fields of electromagnetic attraction and repulsion, only fields of hatred and coercion. Only force fields." (Amis, 134)

This way Martin Amis explains through the words of the narrator Samson Young the framework within which the main actions take place. As will be shown later, this mutual influence does not concern only individuals but the whole society as well, which helps to create the dystopian climate.

A prominent postmodernist feature, the genre mixture, is strongly present in *The Child in Time:* "psychological fiction, political-social criticism, dystopia, tutorial on the mysteries of modern physics, and novel with supernatural elements (…) indeed a substantial generic range for one text." (Malcolm, 100) In this sense dystopia counts as one of the genres used by McEwan with the goal of reminding the readers of the complexity of the world they describe. Not as strong as in the other book, this element is present in *London Fields* as well. Its poignant language reminds of a satire but as James Diedrick points out, the postmodernity is deeply embedded in Martin Amis's work in all its complexity: "Calling Amis's fiction 'postmodern,' then, involves far more than stylistic analysis, since his style is inseparable from, and embodies, his larger social outlook." (Diedrick, 18) And indeed, the descriptions of the global state of the world may be seen as political-social criticism and the dystopia is generically present. Together all these features create a mixture of genres that adds up to the complexity of the novel.

III. Dystopia in Martin Amis's London Fields and Ian McEwan's The Child in Time

In this part we will have look at how dystopia is grasped as a theme and how this theme is further used as a device to support and develop the narration. As shown above, the dystopian character of the two novels is not apparent at first sight. The authors use technique of incluing and the readers only slowly come to realise what is the nature of the world in which the main characters live. Although the first strikes of the outer world come as early as the first pages of both the books, it is only further in the plot when the gloomy atmosphere becomes definitively installed in the heads of the readers.

3.1 Threat of mutually asserted nuclear destruction

The most obvious common feature is undoubtedly the threat of nuclear war. It is explicitly mentioned in both the works and strongly contributes to the distressed tone that sublimates through *The Child in Time* as well as through *London Fields*, even though the latter leaves more anxious impression, as Martin Amis "captures the zeitgeist, a mood of millennial Angst that is bound up with the novel's arresting metafictional gestures." (Head, 211) Not only are the readers of *London Fields* exposed to a complex portrait of expected destruction. The protagonists are influenced by it as well. (Diedrick, 130) Although the menace of nuclear holocaust is often repeated, there are obviously more factors that assert it, most importantly the lack of any positive resolution.

Let us see how the threat of nuclear war is presented in the two works. The capital difference resides in the character of the nuclear crisis. In *The Child in Time*, there is a clearly distinguishable peak, where the risks are the most overwhelming: "(…) the second day of the Olympic Games brought a sudden threat of global extinction (…) Two sprinters, a Russian and an American, (…) rubbed shoulders at the starting blocks (…)" and the American nuclear forces have been brought to "their most advanced state of readiness. The Russians did

likewise." (McEwan, 35) The long-term tension must have been immense, when even such a minute spark was capable of lighting the atomic fire, still the perception of this dimension is only secondary — the purpose of this situation lies elsewhere. This peak comes about the time, when Steven is in deep lethargy, another stage of the psychic state after losing his only child. He sits all day long in front of the television watching it indifferently.

There is nothing specific explained about the global situation in *London Fields* as well. Although the mentions of it are by far more frequent here, all of these are only fragments, moreover very vague ones from news, other people, etc. However, what can be found out is that the pressure is constant in longer term, as there are many people leaving London throughout the novel. As is the case of the other moments incorporated in the plot, the readers are indirectly advised to expect gradation: "(…) at the moment of full eclipse on November 5, as the Chancellor made his speech in Bonn, two very big and very dirty nuclear weapons would be detonated, one over the Palace of Culture in Warsaw, one over Marble Arch." But the information originates from Guy's younger brother Richard who is "(…) a mine of unspeakable information," (Amis, 394) so when the nuclear strikes do not happen at the end of the story the readers are probably not surprised, if they remember their mentioning at all, yet still the danger is omnipresent.

3.2 Global political situation

A connotation of this allegedly planned act is the possible symbolism of the choice of the Palace of Culture and Marble Arch: Britain is no longer a world power and its status is similar to that of Poland within the Warsaw Pact — one of the nations enslaved by its much stronger *ally*; that London may be sacrificed, because it is no longer an important city, a mere province, perhaps conquered by money rather than with force. Towards the end of the story, Guy calls to Richard, "who forthrightly confirmed what they had both suspected: all

American money was leaving the City." Again, the possibility of nuclear catastrophe lets know about itself right in the next paragraph: "The American retreat was in any case far less significant than the rollover it might entrain", and again on the next page: "(…) the sun was right there at the end of the street like a nuclear detonation." (Amis, 365) This repeated reference to this sinister event influences to a high extent the feel of the novel.

With his usual excessive use of metaphors, Amis makes an allusion to the periods like McCarthyism, when America was temporarily tending towards a repressive regime, and it seems that now the U. S. are ultimately sliding down to it: "America had had her neuroses before, like when she tried giving up drink, like when she started finding enemies within, like when she thought she could rule the world; but she had always gotten better again. But now she was going insane, and that was the necessary condition. In a way she was never like anywhere else. Most places just are something, but America had to mean something too, hence her vulnerability — to make-believe, to false memory, false destiny. And finally it looked as though the riveting struggle with illusion was over, and America had lost." (Amis, 366) If America had lost this struggle means that world has lost its leading democratic power, which leads to one of the key dystopian elements — the situation where there is nowhere to escape. Even those who do not agree with the politics of the USA have to admit that America, and not the Soviet Union, was the place where people actually wanted to escape to. This loss of ideals is what makes possible the sacrifice of London, which is in turn a further evidence that politically America is slowly getting on the same level as Soviet Union.

Nevertheless the threat of mutually asserted destruction does not prevent wars completely. In the world of *London Fields*, the world powers are engaged in a conflict, which they have not declared openly and in which they do not fight each other. "This was a new kind of conflict; *spasm war* and *unfettered war*

and, unavoidably, *superwar* were among the buzzwords; *proxy war* because the world powers seeded it and tested weapons systems in it and kept each other busy with it; but the money was coming from Germany and Japan (and China?), and other brokers of the balance of power." Due to the ongoing scientific progress, these weapon systems are inevitably more efficient and in the connection with the above shown advancing recklessness and moral devastation of the people around the world, not only in Britain, the brutality of war is unmatched by any military conflict so far. 'If you want to get an idea of what's happening there,' said his informant at the Red Cross, 'read an account of what the Khmer Rouge did in the Seventies and multiply everything by ten. Body count. Area involved. No. Square it. Cube it." (Amis, 142) This incomplete information on the war further encourage the destructive imagination that is transferred unto the readers. This fragmentary treatment concerns the other aspects of dystopia as well; it goes hand in hand with the techniques of incluing and repetitive designation that will be dealt with later.

3.3 National government

As far as the form government is concerned, *London Fields* are free of any mention on that account — there are only indirect allusions to the progressing totalitarian tendencies in America. *The Child in Time* is more generous in this respect. We know that the country has a strong leader and moreover the governing party has virtuously mastered the technology of power, as shows the case when the beforehand written version *The Authorised Childcare Handbook* leaks out, while it should be still in phase of creation by a special committee. It is a scandal, but with its dexterous politics the government is able to continue, only the Home Secretary is discharged. There is also further evidence of the skilfulness of the governmental politics, notably the institution of the licensed beggars (see below): "To give money ensured the success of the Government

programme. Not to give involved some determined facing away from private distress. There was no way out," (McEwan, 8)

The government is explicitly designated as right-wing, which is consistent with its programme of privatisation. There are mentions of prepared sale of schools to private investors and lowering the leaving age (McEwan, 28), which corresponds with the politics of Margaret Thatcher, who "closed down more grammar schools than Crosland or Shirley Williams." (Ramsden, 814) However, the changes are described as "an attempt to return to a world of the past certainties and authority," (Malcolm, 105) which is one of the levels of the description of time in the book that deals with its various modifications, its flow in differing directions and its non-linearity in general. Its plot as such is set in the near future, but there are elements through which McEwan returns back to the past and shows the time in a non-linear way, as is the case of the puzzling flashback, when he sees his parents in the past, or his friend Charles, who moves to the countryside to play a ten year old boy.

Another feature of the government is its inclination towards repressiveness. A mention is made that the police are armed, which is pointed by David Malcolm as a shocking deviation from British empirical reality (Malcolm, 97) The repressive qualities may be further asserted by the government's management of a great number of licensed beggars, as is shown below. This tendency to repression and control is well captured by the extracts from *The Authorised Childcare Handbook* where advices are given to parents how to raise their children, strictly defining the roles of man and woman in the society and calls to loyalty and national unity. These extracts open all the chapters and the readers are constantly reminded of the authoritarian tendencies of the government.

3.4 Presentation of poverty, class, crime and disorder

Another correspondent attribute is the ubiquitous poverty. There are significant groups of population in both the texts that undergo financial hardships. It is considerably easier for the readers of *London Fields* to get acquainted with the material conditions in which these people live, as Keith, one of the leading characters comes from such class. In *The Child in Time*, where the main characters are of higher social status, readers learn about the poor only indirectly. They come to contact with lower classes in the form of so called "licensed beggars", who have to visibly wear official badges and to use only regulated black bowls for collection of money (McEwan, 9). The economic situation is shortly brought up with scattered allusions. Concerning the depiction of the poor people's lives the two novels converge. The licensed beggars, however, are an interesting phenomenon that may have some other implications. First and the most obvious is the level of proliferation of poverty to the point that it was more rentable to legitimize begging than to prosecute it. Yet the possibility of the repression is not completely excluded, as the police are armed, and there is even a mention of some kind of riots in a London suburb, (McEwan, 23) but free of any mention of its cause(s). The likelihood of the repression would be supported by the fact that Stephen can always tell a beggar by the official badge they are supposed to wear. The second, although maybe contradictory, interpretation is that the people did not have anything else to do or even that they did not wanted to work, possibly because of the insupportable working conditions, which is imaginable, if we see this society as a logical development of Thatcherite reduction of the power of trade unions, (Ramsden, 815). This implication would be in accordance with the below described general apathy that rules the society of *The Child in Time*.

The existence of licensed beggars in *The Child in Time* is not only the "art of a bad government", it is also an example of institutionalized class separation. In

London Fields, the classes are separated naturally, unconsciously: "Keith (…) acted also, of course, in the name of *class*. Class! Yes, it's still here. Terrific staying power, and against all the historical odds. (…) Even a nuclear holocaust, I think, would fail to make that much of a dent in it. (…) Class never bothered Keith; he never thought about it 'as such'; (…). It would surprise Keith a lot if you told him it was *class* that poisoned his every waking moment." (Amis, 24) The classes live their own lives and do not encounter each other too often. As a result of that, the rich live in their houses separated from the rest of the world, attended by the household staff, as was the case of Guy in *London Fields*, who only recently get acquainted with the life of ordinary people in London: "He hadn't used a telephone box in years, if indeed he had ever used one." (Amis, 94) There are dispersed allusions to their class relation throughout the novel, for example "a strong interaction was taking place between the men: the power of class (…). Guy looked at Keith with contempt," (Amis, 341) while the tension slowly increases in its strength to the point that Guy and Keith fight in the gradating end of the plot. The fight bears strong symbolism of social statuses: "After a thousand years of war and revolution, of thought and effort, and history, and the permanent millennium, and the promised end of mine and thine, Guy still had all the money, and all the strength. When Keith came running low across the carpark, Guy was waiting, with all that strength. They squared up to one another. And Keith lost." (Amis, 464) By this means Amis puts the two classes against each other and lets the privileged one to win this another symbolic fight in the long history of class struggles.

3.5 General apathy in the society and its moral devastation

One of the aspects that might make possible the government's survival after the scandal with *The Authorised Childcare Handbook* was the general apathy ruling the society. "It was generally agreed that the country is full of the wrong sort of

people." (McEwan, 10) This feeling is personified by Stephen's father, former officer in the army, who believed that "these committees are a lot of flannel as far as I can see. (…) It's to make people believe the report when they read it, and most people are such bloody fools, they will believe it." (McEwan, 88) By the words of Stephen's father McEwan expresses similar feelings that Stephen himself has when watching the television shows, as shown in the first part of this thesis.

Considering the general mood of the society, Amis goes even further. He depicts utter moral devastation, of which two aspects are clearly distinguishable. It is deep and it is global. The depth is best illustrated by the following excerpt: "Burglars were finding that almost everywhere had been burgled. Burglars were forever bumping into one another, (…) there were burglar jams on rooftops and stairways. (…) Returning from burgling, burglars would discover that they had been burgled, sometimes by the very burglar that they themselves had just burgled! (…) When enough burglars found burgling a waste of time, (…) burgling would become worth doing again. But burglars had plenty of time to waste (…) so they just went on burgling." Here Martin Amis with his enchanting ironical style introduces the readers to the world of burgling, which, "when viewed in Darwinian terms, was clearly approaching a crisis." (Amis, 248) This scheme is repeated again when Keith ponders upon the future of cheating, "yet no one seemed to have thought through the implications of a world in which *everyone* cheated. (Amis, 113) This fact is illustrated by the behaviour of the main characters. Not all of them burgle, but all of them cheat. Keith is a cheater, Guy cheats his wife and Nicola cheats men in order to destroy as many of them as possible. And they are not alone. "The streets are full of jokers, dodgers (…) whole crews of Keiths…" (Amis, 134) The global stretch of moral devastation is documented indirectly: "Countries go insane like people go insane; and all over the world countries reclined on

couches or sat in darkened rooms chewing dihydrocodeine and Temazepam or lay in boiling baths or twisted in straitjackets or stood there banging their heads against the padded walls." (Amis, 366) Let us not forget that the countries are created by humans, therefore the corrupt state usually means that in their majority the inhabitants are corrupt as well. This global spread of these undesirable conditions also moves *London Fields* towards the classical dystopia, where the aspect of impossibility of escape is important. But again, these are only hints, everything is indirect. There comes no Mustapha Mond with an exhaustive explanation.

London Fields IS furthermore abundant with depictions of physical decline of London which are connected to that of its inhabitants: "(…) vandalism had left telephone boxes far behind. Vandalism had moved on to the human form. People now treated *themselves* like telephone boxes, ripping out the innards and throwing them away, and plastering their surfaces with sex-signs and graffiti…" (Amis, 94) This tone, which is spread throughout the whole story, may be seen as a device to underline some pathological aspects of behaviour of the individuals, who are themselves "marginalized, peculiar, and yet oddly and perversely comic." (Lane, Mengham, Tew, 194) This definition wholly applies to Keith, with his obsession of pornography, cheating, ill treatment of women etc. On the other hand, when there are many people who conduct themselves in such extreme ways, does it not lessen the contract? The response is no, even the objection seems logical, because this lessening of the contract has paradoxically its effect in strengthening the perception of dystopia.

3.6 The role of mass media

The domain of the lower social classes in the postmodern society is usually the entertainment through mass media. Our two examples are no exception. *The Child in Time* comments on common television shows in a recently opened television channel, "sponsored by the Government and specializing in game and

chat shows, commercials and phone-ins." (McEwan, 124) Two mutual tendencies encounter each other in this point: the need of people for being entertained and the need of the government to get the people entertained. Another role of mass media in *The Child in Time* is to underline Stephen's lethargy after the loss of his child. Watching television, as the passive end of the transmission-reception chain of the broadcasting is put into connection with excessive drinking, which does not make for a positive image of the mass media in McEwan's eyes.

In *London Fields*, the narrator Sam Young ponders upon the quality and quantity of the information conveyed by the media: "I have been consulting the *proper papers*. A great deal of comment (most of it stodgily Pharisaical), some analysis (jovial stuff about the verification procedures) — and no news, not of a geopolitical nature anyway. The Gulf, Israel of course, Germany of course, Hungary, Cambodia and so on. But no *news*. (…) The television is even worse. (…) Soap and sitcom. Oh, and a quite incredible amount of darts. There's practically a whole channel of it, a whole network of darts." (Amis, 116) Here the tendency of entertainment is complemented with the inclination towards obscuring the truth. The media representation of reality is always different from the objective reality, but it is not clear where the general lack of information in *London Fields* originates from. It does not seem that the government would be applying the censorship as such, but there is a mention of a policy adopted by all the parties engaged in the *proxy wars*, that is to say "killing all journalists" (Amis, 142) It is true that the world powers are not engaged directly in the conflict, yet it is still unthinkable for a truly democratic government to adopt such a policy and therefore it implies what the nature of the leading world powers is.

The above described lack of information is furthermore important for the general mood of the novel and there is a paragraph, too, that is dedicated to

rumours, asking what is their origin and claiming that "a kind of inverse scepticism takes over, when there's no news." (Amis, 117) And indeed, this state provokes an expectation that something sinister will happen and the readers struggle with this expectation throughout the reading of the whole novel.

3.7 Devastation of nature

One more shared feature is the devastation of nature, a principal consequence of which is the abnormal weather. Excessive drought accompanied by water shortages lasting for long months alternated with unexpected change to winter weather with a transition period of ruining inundations in *The Child in Time*, or with a long period of heavy raining in London Fields: "madrid 12 rain. magnitogorsk 9 rain. mahabad 14 rain. managua 12. rain. (…) That's right: it was raining all over the world. The biosphere was raining." (Amis, 193) The presentation of ecological problems does not miss the chance of a certain nuance of mysteriousness: "the dogs aren't living as long as they used to. Nothing is. (…) How will we teach the children to speak when all the animals are gone?" (Amis, 97) Only metaphorically Amis points out pollution as the teargas of the streets, (Amis, 369) whereas *The Child in Time* is more explicit, as for instance, in enumeration of possible causes of the present weather problems: "the encroaching ice age, the melting ice caps, the ozone layer depleted by fluorocarbons, the sun in its death throes." (McEwan, 123)

The pitiful state of nature is in both the novels admittedly credited to humans. In this respect, Ian McEwan gives voice to Stephen's friend Thelma, a physicist. She makes a few longer discourses regarding theoretical findings of the physics and the state of science: "There has been a scientific revolution this century and hardly anyone (…) was thinking it through." This careless pursuit, in combination with the selfishness of humans is the cause of the present state of the world: "discoveries, she said, were now the rat-race end of science." But

as *The Child In Time* has generally a more positive tone than *London Fields*, McEwan offers a resolution, which is presented through Thelma's speech to Stephen, where she states that "the quantum physics would feminize physics, all science, make it softer, less arrogantly detached, more perceptive to participating in the world it wanted to describe." (McEwan, 43) It is possible to argue that the author attributes the present state of the world to men, when it is governed by "the institutions that they and not women has shaped." (McEwan, 55) Amis's stance is similar to that of McEwan: "Imagine the planet as a human face — a *man's* face, because men did it. Can you see him through the smoke and heat-wobble? His scalp churns with boils and baldspots and surgeon's scars. What hair is left is worried white. The face beneath is saying: I know I shouldn't have tried that stuff. (…) I get an awful feeling that this is stuff you can't recover from. Look what it's done to me." (Amis, 369) Various elements, such as Keith's approach to the women, break-up of the Guy's marriage, death of Nicola, or the suicide of Samson Young, the only protagonist who had a respectful attitude towards women, show that the disintegration between the male world and the female world is enormous. Therefore this discourse only adds up to the fearful impression left by the novel.

IV Postmodern narrative techniques concerning dystopia

4.1 The influence of dystopia on the narration

The principal moment when the dystopian qualities of the general social ambience occur can be found in *The Child in Time*. The story as a whole departs from a single point, which is the kidnapping of Stephen's daughter Kate. The act itself seems improbable — daylight abduction amidst the crowds of people in the supermarket. The world was not safe. The insecurity, which is an integral part of these two dystopias of the 1980s, has made the whole story possible. This is different from *London Fields*, where no specific action of importance to the plot occurs on the basis of the dystopian nature of the background. It is rather the personal dispositions that have been formed by the conditions.

The outer world in *The Child in Time* prepares the main trigger of the story and then makes pondering over it possible by means of events, which in their turn do not have an impact on the development of the story. On the other hand, *London Fields* use the global conditions as a ground for creating metaphors and a framework for the plot, which is influenced by the environment in its whole length. In *London Fields*, the employment of the theme is complicated in the sense of direct responsibility. The fact is that the main characters' psychical dispositions are given also by the world they live in, which applies for the rest of humankind as well. Nevertheless, together they form back the world and thus the cyclic influence is established with no tendencies towards improvement in sight.

As for *The Child in Time*, dystopia as a logical development of the current policies is already sufficiently discussed (Malcolm, 96–98). This is not the case of *London Fields*, as here, too, there are a few points that can be seen in such way. Amis mentions Reactor No.6 at Thierry (179), which he puts together with the Reactor No.4 at Chernobyl, making a clear allusion to an

alleged nuclear disaster, probably in France. Another point that might be seen as such continuation might be the mention of the America's attempt at ruling the world. (Amis, 366) At the time of publication of the novel, such attempt had not taken place. (One might argue that the idea of the logical development applies also to The war on terrorism declared by the US, however, as a prediction this argument is invalid since in *London Fields*, the Soviet Union still exists.) Together with the assumption made on the same page that the USA are drifting towards a totalitarian system, these two moments might be a reaction to the politics of Ronald Reagan. An interesting thing is that Martin Amis was apparently informed about ineffectiveness of the communist organisation of the work. Reading newspaper, Samson Young discovers that "the Soviet Union is working a seven-day week." (Amis, 163) Other interpretation of this fact might be a preparation for a war. Nevertheless, taking into account the giant nuclear arsenals of USA and USSR this assumption seems rather false.

4.2 Narrative devices used in connection with the theme

The dystopia is introduced principally through the use of a technique called incluing. It is a term coined by a Welsh writer Jo Walton, meaning "the process of scattering information seamlessly through the text, as opposed to stopping the story to impart the information." (Walton) It is used by Amis as well as by McEwan. As per the aforementioned character of the description of the overall social and moral environment, these elements only slowly emerge from the fabric of the text, leaving the picture of the environment incomplete and thus employing the readers' imagination.

Another technique, also known as repetitive designation, serves as a support for incluing. Using this technique the author simply makes the readers aware of the fact that should not be hidden under layers of other information that comes with the plot. By the repeated occurrence the importance is gained. That is why the threat of a nuclear attack seems more serious in *London Fields* than in *The*

Child in Time. There are of course other phenomena that are repeatedly designated, most importantly perhaps the licensed beggars in *The Child in Time*. These are important for the readers to understand the basic facts and conditions of the society. Here it is the level of poverty; the beggars are so numerous that there has been the need to make their status official. This is the fact that the readers cannot guess from Stephen's situation, the element of licensed beggars is introduced in addition to the plot, so perhaps it is a demonstration of McEwan's political inclination to depict the government as identifiably right-wing.

In the rich language of *London Fields*, Martin Amis uses plenty of metaphors and parallels. The parallels are an important use of the dystopian environment, because they reinforce the credibility of the conveyed information. As long as the readers already know, or expect, the ending of one element, they make projection of this experience over the other constituent. The most remarkable use of parallelism is the supposed death of Nicola. The readers learn that her death will come on her birthday, the 5th of November, and that there will be a full solar eclipse on the same day. There are hints spread across the book, as a result of which a subconscious connection comes to life even before Nicola admits it to herself: "I identify with the planet." (Amis, 396) The possibility of nuclear war is repetitively designated, Nicola's death has been foreshadowed and the relation of Keith and Guy is slowly getting escalated. Together with the calculated solar eclipse, the book is inevitably heading towards a dramatic ending.

V Conclusion

From the above mentioned analysis we are able to see that although the dystopian societies outlined in the two novels share many common aspects, it is the general direction towards which the societies are heading what makes the readers feel the difference. On one hand, we have a Britain with a strong, centralized government, explicitly rightist, with inclinations to privatization, slowly drifting towards a totalitarian state. The government in *The Child in Time* is capable of effective strategies to keep order and to manage to balance without fall, be it by the means of bread and circuses, by the means of an outer enemy, or by the means of pursuing dexterous politics. On the other hand, we have a Britain that is rather weak, with a government not fully in control of the situation, fully in the shadow of the stronger US. The moral disintegration of the society reaches its peak and people are totally indifferent. The bread and circuses work here as well, yet still they serve only to further disintegration of the society.

We have seen that dystopia can have various uses, ranging from a mere part of the postmodern mixture of genres to an extremely complex web of hints and allusions serving to manipulate the readers. It can also serve as a theme of warning. Although its intensity is not as immediate as it was in the first generation of dystopian novels, the main concerns, the nuclear annihilation and the liquidation of the nature are inherently very serious matters. Seen from the distance of more than twenty years, the warnings seem to remain unacknowledged: nature is still plundered, even though technologies exist that render many of current harmful approaches useless. Even though after the fall of the Soviet Union, which came unforeseen by the two novels in question, the menace of nuclear weapons have lessened (to the extent that Michael Head calls the warnings in Martin Amis's work "apparently anachronistic" even in 2002), the question arises again with the new tendencies of nuclear proliferation and the international terrorism. Concerning dystopia as a prediction, both McEwan and Amis were fortunately unsuccessful.

Conceivable consequential research on this field may be developed in synchronic direction for a better connection of these two works with other works treating dystopia, published in the 1980s, facultatively covering the science fiction. In addition to that, the diachronic approach may be employed to treat the theme of development of dystopia in British, possibly English-written literature in general.

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